UA LITTLE ROCK



CHANCELLOR'S

ANNUAL REPORT 2026









WELCOME

In this year's report we reflect on our accomplishments of the year as we also begin to celebrate the very special occasion of our centennial year. This is an opportune time to reflect on what makes us who we are and to consider what will define us as we begin our next one hundred years.

As I prepare for retirement at the end of June 2027, I've been thinking about this a lot and I'd like to share with you what I think makes UA Little Rock special.

UA Little Rock has always had a lot to offer its students as a metropolitan institution in the capital city. In recent years, we've focused on making this institution more affordable as students began to identify cost as a major decision factor. Seven years ago, our net price of attendance was one of the highest for Arkansas 4-year public universities, and now we're one of the lowest. For that work, we have been recognized by Niche as the best value 4-year university (non-virtual) in Arkansas. We worked very hard on that objective and it's paying off with more students recognizing our good value and more choosing to come to UA Little Rock.

But it's not enough to open the door. We also had to define our value proposition through the quality of the experience that our students would have here and what they would have to show for it by graduation.

We emphasize that students at UA Little Rock have access to the resources uniquely available in a capital city metro area including engagement with nearly every sector of the economy. To take full advantage of this we start with a commitment to make experiential learning a hallmark of a UA Little Rock education. Creating these experiences requires strong partnerships in the community. The relationships we're building with our corporate and community partners are vital to building the infrastructure for truly effective and mutually rewarding experiences for students and businesses. What holds all of this together is the personal connection factor. Faculty, staff, and external partners all work directly and closely with our students in and out of the classroom to reach full potential.

What our students tell us is that they feel the advantage. The unique alignment of great professors, personal attention, and the opportunity to interface with an incredible array of experts in the field on a regular basis positions our students to graduate fully prepared with a lot to show for their UA Little Rock education.

Spread the word!

Sincerely,



Christina S. Drale, Chancellor
UA Little Rock









ABOUT OUR STUDENTS

At UA Little Rock, our classrooms are filled with traditional and nontraditional, transfer, first-generation, military, working, parenting, and independent students, all bringing unique experiences. This blend of perspectives creates a dynamic learning environment and vibrant campus life where the exchange of viewpoints fosters creativity, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the world.

Our Undergraduate Students:

- **90%** ARE FROM ARKANSAS
- **63%** RECEIVE PELL ASSISTANCE
- **10%** ARE MILITARY STUDENTS
- **77%** LIVE WITHIN 50 MILES OF LITTLE ROCK
- **3.28** IS THE AVERAGE GPA OF ENTERING FRESHMEN

Our Graduate Students:

- **68%** ARE FROM ARKANSAS
- **79%** RECEIVED A BACHELOR'S DEGREE FROM ANOTHER INSTITUTION
- **6%** ARE MILITARY STUDENTS
- **69%** LIVE WITHIN 50 MILES OF LITTLE ROCK

Types of students attending UA Little Rock:



- **45%** Undergraduate Main Campus
- **31%** Undergraduate Taking Online Courses Only
- **7%** Graduate Main Campus
- **11%** Graduate Taking Online Courses Only
- **6%** Law Students

Top 5 Undergraduate Majors

1. NURSING AND PRE-NURSING (BSN)
2. PSYCHOLOGY (BA)
3. BIOLOGY (BA)
4. CRIMINAL JUSTICE (BA)
5. SOCIAL WORK (BSW)

Top 5 Graduate Majors

1. LAW (JD)
2. SOCIAL WORK (MSW)
3. COUNSELING (MA)
4. COMPUTER AND INFORMATION SCIENCE (PH.D.)
5. BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (MBA)

TOP 10 Counties in Arkansas where our graduates live:

Pulaski	25,284
Saline	6,176
Faulkner	2,238
Lonoke	1,865
Garland	1,246
Jefferson	1,044
Washington	819
Benton	730
White	725
Grant	473

TOP 16 Employers of UA Little Rock graduates:

- Arkansas Children's Hospital
- University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences
- Baptist Health
- Walmart Inc.
- University of Arkansas at Little Rock
- Little Rock School District
- Southwest Power Pool, Inc.
- Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield
- State of Arkansas
- Acxiom Corporation
- U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
- Simmons Bank
- Mitchell, Williams, Selig, Gates & Woodyard, P.L.L.C.
- Friday, Eldredge & Clark, LLP
- Bank OZK
- Dillard's, Inc.

Top 5 States Where Alumni Live:



INVESTING IN IMPACT

UA LITTLE ROCK 100 CENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN



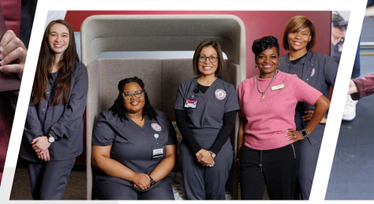














Celebrating a Century. Building the Next.

This year, UA Little Rock began celebrating a milestone a century in the making.

As the university marks its 100th anniversary, the centennial honors a legacy of expanding opportunity, transforming lives, and strengthening Arkansas through education. What began in 1927 as Little Rock Junior College has grown into a comprehensive metropolitan research university serving more than 8,000 students and preparing graduates to lead in their communities and professions.

"Our centennial is both a celebration and a moment of reflection," Chancellor Christina Drale said. "The vision and determination of those who founded this institution created opportunities that have transformed lives for generations. As we honor the people, achievements, and milestones that shaped our first 100 years, we are also looking forward to a future filled with possibility for our students, our community, and our state."





The celebration began with the dedication of new UA Little Rock-branded street signs, creating a lasting welcome for visitors to campus. When students returned for the fall semester, they celebrated the start of the second century with centennial-themed festivities and signed a commemorative banner that will become part of the university's centennial time capsule.

The centennial was also woven into many of the university's longstanding traditions, including BBQ at Bailey, where alumni and friends celebrated the milestone together. Each month, the university has shared moments as part of its "100 Moments of Impact" series, highlighting the people, achievements, and innovations that shaped its first century.

The centennial celebration will continue into the spring with several signature events. The Shellam Flake Planetarium will reopen in January after being closed for nearly 20 years, welcoming visitors back to a reimagined space for astronomy education and discovery.

A new downtown exhibit will open in February, inviting the community to explore 100 years of UA Little Rock's impact on Little Rock and Arkansas. The university will also host a centennial picnic celebrating every decade of Trojans. Additionally, the university will conclude the year of celebrations with a centennial time capsule, preserving part of the university's history for future generations to enjoy.

"The centennial is an opportunity to celebrate the people who built UA Little Rock, the students and alumni who continue to shape its story, and the possibilities that lie ahead," said Dr. Carrie Phillips, chair of the university's Centennial Planning Committee. "We want this year to bring together generations of Trojans while showcasing the impact this university has had on our city, our state, and the lives of those we serve."

As UA Little Rock enters its second century, it remains committed to the mission that has defined its first: expanding opportunity, serving Arkansas, and preparing students to make a difference in their communities and beyond.









A Century of Generosity. A Future of Opportunity.

The Centennial Campaign concluded as the most successful fundraising effort in UA Little Rock history, surpassing its $250 million goal and more than doubling the university's previous comprehensive campaign.

Centered on scholarships, student success, program excellence, and the living and learning environment, the Centennial Campaign transformed the university in ways that will benefit Arkansas for generations to come.

"The Centennial Campaign was never just about reaching a fundraising goal," said Christian O'Neal, vice chancellor for university advancement. "It was about creating opportunities that will change lives for generations and ensuring UA Little Rock is positioned to serve Arkansas for the next 100 years."



A significant portion of campaign support expanded access to higher education by growing scholarship opportunities for students and families. Philanthropic investments helped launch initiatives such as the Trojan Guarantee and the Half-Off Scholarship, making a UA Little Rock education more affordable and opening new pathways for students to earn a college degree.

Campaign support also transformed the campus experience through the revitalization of Trojan Way, creating a vibrant front door to campus and a welcoming gathering place for students, faculty, staff, alumni, and visitors.

Donors also made lasting investments in academic excellence by establishing endowed director positions in the School of Engineering and the School of Education. Additionally, private support also helped endow the director of the simulation lab in the School of Nursing. These endowed leadership roles ensure key areas of campus have the resources and leadership to continue growing and innovating.

Perhaps the campaign's most enduring achievement was a 192% increase in the university's endowment. That growth creates a permanent source of support for scholarships, faculty excellence, innovative programs, and student success for generations to come.

The Centennial Campaign may have reached its conclusion, but its impact is only beginning. The investments made today will continue to shape the lives of students, strengthen academic excellence, and position UA Little Rock for success well into its second century.

211	22,762	197,887	$266+
New Endowments	Unique Donors	Total Donations	Million Raised

ACCESS

UA Little Rock Meets $1.5 Million Scholarship Challenge Nearly a Year Early

UA Little Rock reached a major milestone in its commitment to college affordability, meeting the $1.5 million Enduring Opportunity Scholarship Challenge nearly a year ahead of schedule and unlocking the full investment from the Windgate Foundation.

The achievement transforms Windgate's original $7.5 million gift into a $9 million investment in scholarship support for UA Little Rock students.

The Enduring Opportunity Scholarship Program was launched in May 2025 with a transformational gift from the Windgate Foundation. The investment included $5 million to establish a permanent endowed scholarship fund and $2.5 million in immediate-use funds to support affordability initiatives while the endowment grows. The Enduring Opportunity Scholarship Program strengthens UA Little Rock's commitment to affordability by establishing a permanent source of endowed scholarship funding.

As part of the investment, Windgate challenged the university to raise an additional $1.5 million to unlock the final $1.5 million of its commitment.

The UA Little Rock community responded quickly.

The university raised the first $500,000 five months ahead of schedule. Donors kept that momentum going, contributing the additional $1 million and completing the full challenge nearly a year before the June 30, 2027 deadline.

"This investment ensures that students, not just today, but for years to come, can earn a high-quality degree with significantly less financial burden," Chancellor Christina Drale said. "That kind of stability strengthens families, communities, and our state."

The Enduring Opportunity Scholarship Program builds on UA Little Rock's broader efforts to make college more affordable and accessible. Programs such as the Trojan Guarantee and Half-Off Scholarship have helped reduce financial barriers for Arkansas students and contributed to several years of enrollment growth.

For nursing student Erryn Washington, scholarship support has made a real difference.

"When I received my scholarship, it felt like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders," Washington said. "Before that, I worried constantly about how I was going to pay for school. Now I can focus on finishing my degree and preparing for a career in healthcare."



> *"When I received my scholarship, it felt like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. Before that, I worried constantly about how I was going to pay for school. Now I can focus on finishing my degree and preparing for a career in healthcare."*
>
> — *Erryn Washington, nursing student*

Alumni, faculty, staff, friends, and other supporters all contributed to meeting the challenge.

The early finish gave UA Little Rock another reason to celebrate as it entered its second century, with the full Windgate commitment secured and growing support for keeping a college education within reach for students.

ENDURING
OPPORTUNITY

UA LITTLE ROCK









ACCESS

Expanding Access Through Transfer Pathways

Access to higher education doesn't always begin on a four-year campus. With more than 1,300 transfer students enrolled during the academic year, UA Little Rock continues to invest in innovative programs that help community college students take the next step toward a bachelor's degree.

Last year UA Little Rock launched Arkansas's first direct admission program for transfer students. Building on established 2+2 transfer pathways, the initiative creates a simpler route to a four-year degree by connecting students at partner community colleges directly with UA Little Rock.

An initial partnership has grown to include multiple institutions, including the University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville, the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton, and the University of Arkansas Pulaski Technical College.

The program aims to reduce barriers that can make it challenging to transfer. For example, eligible students benefit from a waived application fee, coordinated transcript collection, and access to the Trojan Transfer Hub, which helps students understand how their coursework transfers to UA Little Rock degree programs.

Recognizing that access extends beyond admission, UA Little Rock also introduced its first Transfer Orientation program. More than 180 transfer students attended the inaugural event in April where they learned about campus resources and began building relationships on campus before the start of classes.

"Transfer students are an essential part of the UA Little Rock community, and we want them to know they belong here from the very beginning," said Dr. Cody Decker, vice chancellor for student affairs & chief data officer. "Direct admission and Transfer Orientation help make the transition to UA Little Rock easier, giving students a clear path to enrollment and the resources they need to get started."

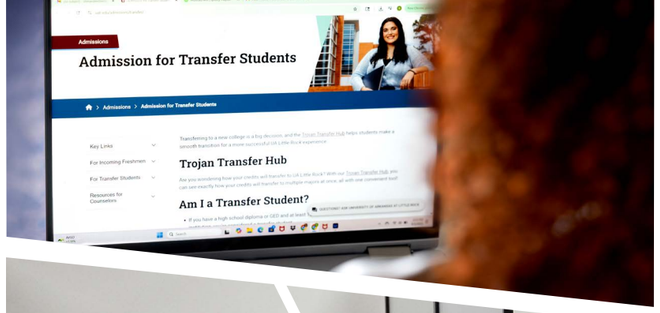
As more students choose to begin their education at a community college, UA Little Rock is creating clearer pathways to a bachelor's degree. By simplifying the transfer process and helping students navigate the transition to campus, the university is expanding access to higher education for students across Arkansas.







Read about how UA Little Rock is supporting transfer students.







"Transfer students are an essential part of the UA Little Rock community, and we want them to know they belong here from the very beginning."

— Dr. Cody Decker, vice chancellor for student affairs & chief data officer

ACCESS

Enrollment Momentum Continues

UA Little Rock continued its enrollment momentum in fall 2026, beginning its second century with more than 8,200 students and continued growth across key enrollment measures.

Overall undergraduate and graduate headcount increased 2%, while student semester credit hours grew 5.1%. Undergraduate enrollment was particularly strong, with headcount increasing 3.1% and credit hours growing 5.8%.

New student enrollment also continued to climb. First-time freshmen increased 10% over the previous year, while the university's freshman class has grown nearly 70% over the past four years. Transfer enrollment increased 6.8%, and new graduate student enrollment grew 4.6%.

The growth marked another year of progress for UA Little Rock as the university continued efforts to make a high-quality college education more accessible. Programs such as the Trojan Guarantee and Half-Off Scholarship have helped reduce financial barriers for Arkansas students, while expanded academic programs, hands-on learning opportunities, and strong connections to the state's workforce have strengthened the value of a UA Little Rock degree.

The increase in student semester credit hours is another important indicator of progress. Credit-hour growth reflects not only students choosing UA Little Rock, but students taking more of the courses they need to continue moving toward graduation.

> *"Credit-hour growth matters because it reflects students making meaningful progress toward completing their degrees."*
>
> — *Chancellor Christina S. Drale*

"Credit-hour growth matters because it reflects students making meaningful progress toward completing their degrees," Chancellor Christina Drale said. "Our responsibility now is to make sure every student has the resources and support to thrive from their first day through graduation."

The fall 2026 enrollment gains continued a multi-year upward trajectory for UA Little Rock and provided strong momentum as the university began its next 100 years.













Nerd Night Inspires the Next Generation of STEM Leaders

Four years ago, the Donaghey College of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics launched Nerd Night as a new way to recruit future science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students and build community among current STEM students. The initial event hosted about 100 students and prospective students.

Just four years later, the event draws hundreds of current and prospective students to campus to explore the STEM opportunities at UA Little Rock. Some of the activities available for students during nerd night include robotics demonstrations, live chemistry experiments, 3D games, and stargazing at the university observatory.

As interest in STEM careers continues to grow, Nerd Night has become an important part of the university's efforts to build Arkansas's future workforce. By introducing students and families to careers in STEM through engaging, hands-on experiences, the event helps demystify STEM fields and encourages more students to consider pursuing them.

The event also strengthens the STEM community on campus. Current students serve as presenters and volunteers while connecting with peers across disciplines. At the same time, prospective students see firsthand the supportive, hands-on learning environment that defines STEM education at UA Little Rock.

"We wanted participants to leave knowing that STEM has a place for everyone," said Trelan Washington, a sophomore, and student organizer for Nerd Night. "Whether they're interested in cybersecurity, biology, engineering, or astronomy, the event helps them see the possibilities available at UA Little Rock."

As Nerd Night has grown, so has its role in student recruitment. In partnership with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, the event lets prospective students explore STEM disciplines while learning about scholarships, admissions, and campus life. Instead of hearing about the programs, visitors meet the people behind them and experience campus for themselves.

> *"...STEM has a place for everyone."*
> *— Trelan Washington, a cybersecurity major and organizer for Nerd Night*













ACCESS

The research revealed an opportunity to strengthen the university's reputation among community, business, and civic leaders by showcasing the success of its students and graduates.





Strengthening Our Message

Over the past several years, UA Little Rock has led with a powerful message: higher education should be affordable and accessible. That commitment remains central to the university's mission and has helped more students pursue their educational goals.

In 2025, the university expanded that message by focusing not only on access, but also on what access makes possible. Stakeholder research confirmed that audiences understood UA Little Rock's commitment to affordability. What they wanted to better understand was the return on that investment and the quality of the educational experience students receive.

The research also revealed an opportunity to strengthen the university's reputation among community, business, and civic leaders by showcasing the success of its students and graduates.

Across campus, students are gaining real-world experience through internships, clinical placements, research, and applied learning opportunities that prepare them to succeed after graduation. Those experiences, combined with the university's strong connections to employers in the capital city, help students launch meaningful careers and make an impact in their communities.

To bring that story to life, the university launched a new campaign that paired current students with alumni who had once stood in their shoes. Their stories demonstrated that affordability is only the beginning. A UA Little Rock education provides the experiences, mentorship, and preparation that leads to successful careers and meaningful lives.

After debuting during the Winter Olympics, the campaign was featured alongside nationally televised events, including the Masters Tournament, the FIFA World Cup, and the NCAA Baseball Super Regionals, helping elevate awareness of UA Little Rock among business, civic, and community leaders.

The campaign reinforced a simple but powerful message: students shouldn't have to choose between affordability and quality. At UA Little Rock, they can have both.

Watch UA Little Rock's new commercial.

Building Arkansas's Workforce for the Future

As industries evolve and workforce needs change, UA Little Rock continues to create opportunities for students while helping Arkansas prepare for the future.

This fall, UA Little Rock welcomed its first students into new bachelor's degree programs in artificial intelligence and early childhood education, as well as a master's in cybersecurity. The new programs expand opportunities for students while addressing workforce needs in some of Arkansas's fastest-growing industries.

Across Arkansas, employers are adopting artificial intelligence while seeking workers with the expertise to implement these technologies responsibly and effectively.

UA Little Rock's Bachelor of Science in Artificial Intelligence ensures students are prepared to lead in this work.

"Everything is moving toward AI, and a lot of companies are trying to catch up," said Michael Goad, manager at Southwest Power Pool. "We're looking for people who have the right academic background or real-world experience to help us keep pace. Those skilled employees are going to become mission-critical."

UA Little Rock is also helping address growing cybersecurity needs through its new Master of Science in Cybersecurity. As cyber threats continue to grow in scale and complexity, businesses, government agencies, and organizations need professionals with advanced expertise to protect critical systems, data, and infrastructure.

"We've always considered UA Little Rock to be a great partner to find employees for our organization. I think this is another aspect in cybersecurity and AI that both our organizations are interested in, and could have a good possible base of potential employees to look at," said Chris Phillips, chief financial officer at the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The new Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Education responds to another pressing need by preparing educators to support Arkansas's youngest learners. The program is bolstered by the Trinity Foundation's investment in early childhood education, which supports educator preparation, research, and community partnerships.

"Education is essential infrastructure – it strengthens communities, families, and futures," said Thomas Dickinson of the Trinity Foundation.

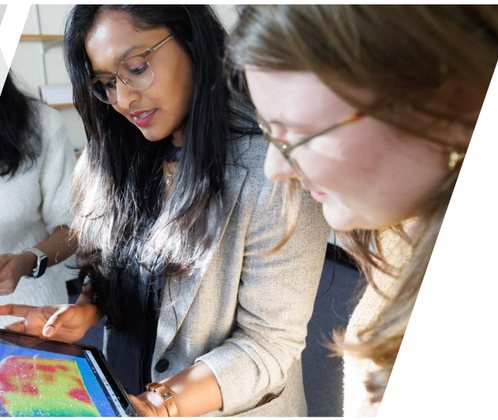
While the fields are different, the goal is the same: preparing students for careers that matter. Through new programs in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and early childhood education, UA Little Rock is helping address workforce shortages, support communities, and create opportunities for students across Arkansas.

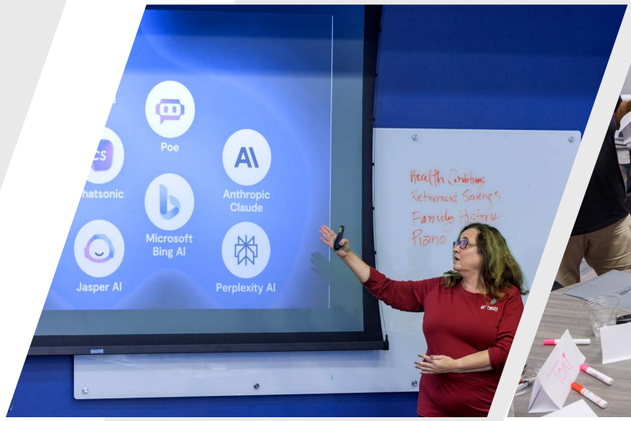
Discover UA Little Rock's Bachelor of Science in Artificial Intelligence, the only such degree offered at a public university in Arkansas.



Learn how UA Little Rock's Master of Science in Cybersecurity prepares students to protect, assess, and secure complex digital systems in today's evolving threat landscape.















Learning to Care as a Team

Today's healthcare challenges require collaboration. Nurses, social workers, physicians, therapists, and other professionals must work together to provide the best possible care for patients.

At UA Little Rock, students are developing those skills before they enter the workforce through growing interprofessional education opportunities that bring future healthcare professionals together in the classroom and simulation environment.

One recent collaboration connected nursing and social work students through a behavioral health simulation that required them to communicate, share information, and coordinate care for a patient experiencing depression and suicidal ideation. The experience gave students the opportunity to practice teamwork while gaining a better understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities.

"One of the greatest benefits of introducing interprofessional experiences early in healthcare education is that students develop a deeper understanding of the roles, responsibilities, expertise, and contributions of other disciplines before entering clinical practice," said Dr. Judy Staley, Williard and Pat Walker director of the Center for Simulation Innovation at UA Little Rock.

For many students, the experience highlighted how patient care depends on effective communication and coordinated support. Nursing students gained a better understanding of social workers' roles in behavioral health, patient advocacy, and resource coordination, while social work students experienced firsthand how their profession contributes within a healthcare team.

"These experiences help break down professional silos before students enter the workforce," said Dr. Laura Danforth, director of the UA Little Rock School of Social Work. "When future healthcare professionals learn to communicate and collaborate early in their training, they are better prepared to work together and provide the highest quality care for their patients."

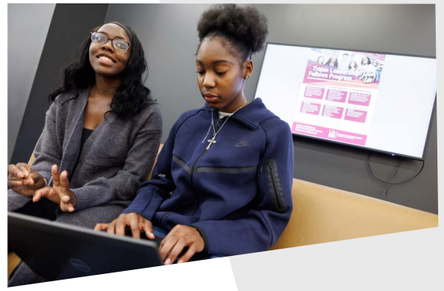
Building on the project's success, faculty are exploring additional opportunities for nursing and social work students to learn alongside one another and strengthen the teamwork skills that are essential in today's healthcare environment.





> *"When future healthcare professionals learn to communicate and collaborate early in their training, they are better prepared to work together and provide the highest quality care for their patients."*
>
> *— Dr. Laura Danforth, director of UA Little Rock School of Social Work*







Closing the Digital Divide

Going back to college takes commitment, especially when pursuing a demanding degree like nursing. Now imagine doing it without reliable access to course materials, assignments, and online resources. For many students, that challenge can make earning a degree significantly more difficult.

For Mikayla Cornelious, a nontraditional senior nursing student at UA Little Rock, access to technology through the CARES Laptop Program has provided the flexibility and reliability she needs to stay on track.

"Nursing school requires a lot of time outside of the classroom for studying, completing assignments, reviewing PowerPoints, researching information, and preparing for exams," she said. "Having my own dependable device means I can complete these responsibilities on my own schedule instead of having to plan around the availability of a public or shared computer."

That flexibility has helped her stay focused on her studies as she works toward completing her nursing degree. This spring, she was named to the Dean's List.

"Nursing school can already be demanding, and worrying about technology is an additional burden that can make it even more difficult," she said. "Having the CARES laptop gave me the ability to focus more of my energy on learning and being successful in my courses rather than worrying about how I was going to complete an assignment or access something required for class."

The program began as an emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic and has evolved into a lasting investment in student success.

> *"Having the CARES laptop gave me the ability to focus more of my energy on learning and being successful in my courses rather than worrying about how I was going to complete an assignment or access something required for class."*
>
> *— Mikayla Cornelious, nontraditional senior nursing student*

Initially funded through the federal CARES Act, the laptop program has continued thanks to support from the Office of the Provost, the Academic Affairs Retention Office, IT Services, and the Ottenheimer Library.

During the year, 294 laptops were in circulation, helping students access coursework, attend classes, and remain connected to university resources.

For many students, the laptops were an essential tool for academic success. According to student feedback surveys, 93% of respondents said having access to a laptop was "very important" to meeting their academic needs, while the remaining 7% said it was "important."

By removing barriers to technology access, UA Little Rock is helping students persist in their studies, achieve academic success, and stay on track toward graduation.

Watch more about the laptop program on KARK.



From Classroom to Emmy Stage

When the 2025 Mid-America Emmy Awards were announced, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's School of Mass Communication had reason to celebrate. A current student and two alumni were among the Emmy winners, a milestone that highlights the school's emphasis on preparing students for success.

The honorees included:

- **Brandon Ramirez,** a 2022 graduate, won an Emmy for Weekend Newscast – All Markets as photographer and editor of KARK 4 News' coverage of the Fordyce community's recovery following a mass shooting.
- **Kwasi Harshaw,** a 2021 graduate, won an Emmy for Team Coverage for his work on Total Solar Eclipse: Arkansas 2024 as part of KARK 4 News' live coverage.
- **Dillon Jackson,** a senior mass communication major from Little Rock, won an Emmy for Weekend Newscast – All Markets as producer of KARK 4 News' coverage of the Fordyce community's recovery following a mass shooting.

> *"These awards are exciting because our students are doing professional-level work while they're still in school. Being in Little Rock gives them access to newsrooms, major events, and people working in the industry. They can take what they're learning in class and put it to work right away."*
>
> — Dr. Kiel Thorlton, director of the School of Mass Communication

Students begin gaining professional experience early in the program, working in newsrooms, on documentary productions, and on their own multimedia projects.

Jackson credits his experience in UA Little Rock's Studio Production class with pushing him beyond his comfort zone and helping him develop skills he now uses professionally.

"UA Little Rock helped me by providing the studio production class where I was pushed into a role I didn't think I would be good at – directing – and forced to learn it," Jackson said. "After a few class projects of directing, I found I really enjoyed it and was somewhat good at it."

That combination of classroom instruction and real-world experience allows students to graduate with professional portfolios, industry connections, and meaningful career experience.

As Arkansas' capital city, Little Rock gives students access to professional news organizations, major events, and industry connections that complement their classroom experience.

"These awards are exciting because our students are doing professional-level work while they're still in school," said Dr. Kiel Thorlton, director of the School of Mass Communication. "Being in Little Rock gives them access to newsrooms, major events, and people working in the industry. They can take what they're learning in class and put it to work right away."

That preparation is also evident to industry leaders who work with UA Little Rock students and graduates.

"At KARK and FOX16, we see firsthand each day the value of giving students opportunities to work in a professional newsroom while they're still in college," said Kyle King, president and general manager of KARK and FOX16 News. "UA Little Rock students and graduates come to us with practical experience and an understanding of what it takes to work in this industry. This pipeline for talented individuals is extremely important to our communities, and it's great to see them earn this kind of recognition. Dillon, Brandon, and Kwasi continue to provide exceptional content across our platforms and are wonderful examples of the teamwork needed in this industry."



> *"This showed me that writing can open doors, change lives, and create opportunities. That's the kind of work I want to keep doing."*
>
> — Tanner Smith, UA Little Rock online student

A Class Assignment with Lasting Impact

When Tanner Smith enrolled in a grant writing course at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, he expected to complete an assignment. As an online student living in Jacksonville, Florida, he didn't expect that assignment to help secure $110,000 for a local nonprofit coffee shop.

Smith, a professional and technical writing major, partnered with Happy Brew, a nonprofit coffee shop that employs individuals with physical and intellectual disabilities and creates an inclusive gathering place for the community. As part of a class project, Smith prepared a grant proposal seeking $20,000 to improve accessibility at the coffee shop.

The result exceeded everyone's expectations.

"I was blown away when I heard the news," Smith said. "It's one thing to do an assignment for a grade, but to see it actually benefit people in the real world is incredibly rewarding."

The Jim Moran Foundation not only awarded the requested $20,000 for an accessibility ramp, but they also committed an additional $90,000 over three years to support Happy Brew's operation.

The project grew out of Dr. Barb L'Eplattenier's grant writing course, where Smith selected both the grant opportunity and the community organization as part of a semester-long, real-world writing project.

Living just a few blocks from Happy Brew, Smith was already familiar with the coffee shop and its mission. He spent time meeting with staff, learning about the organization's goals, and understanding the needs of the people it serves.

"Our experience working with Tanner on grant writing was exceptional," said Amy Franks, director of Happy Brew. "Tanner was extremely professional and compassionate to our employees and the process. He became part of our inter-ability community and worked hard to understand how we could become more accessible to others."

The funding will allow Happy Brew to install the accessibility improvements originally proposed, while also strengthening programs that support employees and interns with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

For Smith, the experience demonstrated the power of writing to create meaningful change.

"This showed me that writing can open doors, change lives, and create opportunities," he said. "That's the kind of work I want to keep doing."







From Resident to Teacher of the Year

When Chadwick Comer entered UA Little Rock's inaugural Trojan Teacher Residency Program, he was preparing for his first middle-school classroom. His residency took him to Jacksonville Middle School, where just two years later, he was named Teacher of the Year.

Comer's journey offers an early glimpse of what the residency program can accomplish.

The Trojan Teacher Residency places education majors in a classroom for an entire academic year, where they work alongside an experienced mentor teacher while completing their degree. Residents gain hands-on experience planning lessons, grading assignments, meeting with families, and managing classrooms long before they become full-time teachers.

"The program builds confidence by allowing you to be in the classroom on a full-time basis," Comer said. "From day one, you are teaching, planning, grading, and meeting with parents under the watchful eye of a mentor teacher who is ready to step in if things get overwhelming."

For Comer, the experience helped bridge the gap between coursework and the realities of teaching.

"There is a significant difference between theory and practice," he said. "An experienced mentor teacher is the bridge between what we learned in class and what we should do in the classroom."

The year-long residency also helped ease many of the challenges new teachers face by allowing residents to develop classroom routines, refine their teaching strategies, and build relationships with students and colleagues before becoming full-time educators.

"Most importantly, remember that you are a teacher, not an observer," Comer said. "The best way to learn it is to do it. So teach."

After finishing his second year as an educator, Comer said being named Teacher of the Year was both humbling and affirming.

"Most importantly, it shows me that I am doing right by my students," he said.

His success comes as Arkansas prepares to require year-long teacher residencies for all first-time teacher candidates beginning in 2027.

"As Arkansas moves to require one-year residencies for all teacher candidates, we are committed to providing a high-quality experience that includes coaching and support from our team, along with opportunities to co-teach with strong mentor teachers," said Dr. Rachel Eells, Windgate director of the UA Little Rock School of Education.

For Comer, the impact of the program is clear. The confidence, experience, and relationships he built during his residency helped prepare him to step into his own classroom and quickly make a difference.

His journey from resident to Teacher of the Year demonstrates the power of learning by doing.





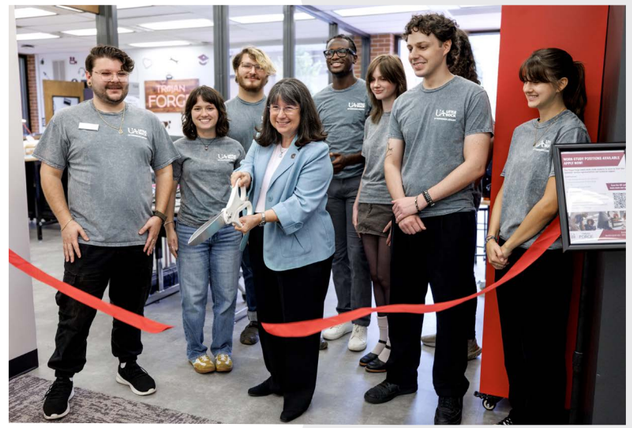
Forging Innovation

When students asked for a space where ideas could become reality, UA Little Rock listened.

New this fall in the Ottenheimer Library, Trojan Forge is the university's makerspace – a collaborative hub where students can create, experiment, and learn by doing. The project was envisioned by Library Vision Partners, a student leadership group that has spent the past two years helping shape the future of the library and advocating for spaces that support innovation and collaboration.

> *"Students didn't just tell us they wanted a makerspace–they helped define what it should be."*
>
> *— Brandon Sollars, director of the Learning Commons*

Student enthusiasm quickly confirmed the need. A prototype makerspace event drew more than 200 participants, while more than 220 students, faculty, and staff signed on in support of the project. That momentum helped secure $50,000 in campus improvement funding from the Chancellor's Office to bring Trojan Forge to life.



Designed to serve students from every discipline, Trojan Forge provides access to 3D printers, sewing machines, vinyl cutters, sublimation printers, digital media software, cameras, and a podcast studio, giving students opportunities to design prototypes, create multimedia projects, explore artistic ideas, and develop practical skills they can carry into the workforce.

"Students didn't just tell us they wanted a makerspace–they helped define what it should be," said Brandon Sollars, director of the Learning Commons. "Trojan Forge reflects their vision for a space where creativity, collaboration, and hands-on learning come together."

Beyond providing access to technology, Trojan Forge is a place where students learn by doing. Workshops introduce participants to 3D printing, digital design, circuitry, crafting, media production, and other hands-on skills that blend creativity with career readiness.

The makerspace also brings people together. Collaborations with academic departments, workforce development, the Arkansas Small Business and Technology Development Center, and student organizations encourage students from different disciplines to share ideas and discover new ways of thinking beyond their own fields.

Now open, Trojan Forge is becoming a campus hub where students from every discipline can learn by doing, build lasting connections, and discover what's possible when creativity and innovation intersect.

Read KARK's Campus Spotlight: UA Little Rock introduces new creative space for students.

TROJAN FORGE

The Science Triangle Comes to Life

For years, some of UA Little Rock's most remarkable science resources were hidden in plain sight.

A planetarium that had inspired generations of students sat dark for nearly two decades. Museum-quality fossils, minerals, and artifacts remained tucked away in storage. Even the excitement generated by the 2024 total solar eclipse could have faded once the telescopes were packed away.

Instead, the faculty imagined something different.

The first step came after the 2024 total solar eclipse, when faculty recognized an opportunity to build on the excitement surrounding astronomy. Using telescopes purchased through a grant for the eclipse celebration, Dr. Greg Guisbiers, associate professor of physics and astronomy, led efforts to restore the observatory after more than a decade of inactivity.

> *"It all started with the solar eclipse."*
>
> *— Dr. Greg Guisbiers, associate professor of physics and astronomy*

"It all started with the solar eclipse," Guisbiers said. "A lot of people were showing a renewed interest in space and astronomy. I thought it was a good idea to get the observatory reopened and do something with all those telescopes."

That momentum continued with the Shellam Flake Planetarium. After a student-produced documentary "Mothball," reminded the community what the long-closed facility had meant to generations of Arkansans, faculty renewed their efforts to bring it back to life.

A transformational $1.2 million gift from Leslye and Ray Shellam made that vision possible. When the planetarium reopens it will feature immersive digital technology while creating new opportunities for students across disciplines.





Beyond astronomy, the planetarium will serve as an instructional resource across the university, giving faculty new ways to bring complex concepts to life. Students could explore archaeological sites, geological formations, biological structures, engineering designs, dark-sky environments, and even immersive artwork, experiences that would be difficult to replicate in a traditional classroom.

"This investment allows us to reimagine the planetarium as an active learning environment that supports teaching and discovery across disciplines," Provost Ann Bain said. "It will provide UA Little Rock with increased learning opportunities for our students and more connection with our community. It is exciting to bring life back to a space that means so much to Little Rock, the university, and future generations of planetarium visitors."

The observatory and planetarium are part of a broader vision taking shape at UA Little Rock: the Science Triangle. The initiative will connect these resources with a new Museum of Natural History, creating three distinct spaces where students and the broader community can experience science in new ways.

Watch* "Mothball," *a short documentary by Adrian Rogers



Under the leadership of Dr. Sinéad Ní Chadhain, chair of the Department of Biology, those long-stored away collections are becoming the foundation for a new Museum of Natural History that will connect students, school groups, and the broader community through interactive exhibits and educational experiences.

"These collections have been incredible teaching resources for years, but very few people have had the opportunity to see them," Ní Chadhain said. "The museum will open those collections to our students and the broader community, creating opportunities for people of all ages to explore natural history in a hands-on way."

These faculty-led projects are forming the Science Triangle, a connected series of experiences designed to make STEM learning more engaging for students and the broader community.

As the Science Triangle comes to life, students and visitors won't simply learn about science – they'll experience it.

> *"This investment allows us to reimagine the planetarium as an active learning environment that supports teaching and discovery across disciplines. It will provide UA Little Rock with increased learning opportunities for our students and more connection with our community. It is exciting to bring life back to a space that means so much to Little Rock, the university, and future generations of planetarium visitors."*
>
> *— Provost Ann Bain*

EXPERIENCE

“Many students want to find a community where they feel supported, valued, and engaged.”

— Alicia Sustaita, coordinator of fraternity and sorority life

Choosing Community

When students arrive at UA Little Rock, they are looking for more than classes and a degree. They are looking for connection: a place where they can find their community.

For a growing number of students, that place is fraternity and sorority life.

This year, fraternity and sorority membership at UA Little Rock grew 127%, increasing from 62 students to 141 students and reaching its highest level in five years.

“Students are often seeking a sense of belonging and connection,” said Alicia Sustaita, assistant director for fraternity and sorority life. “Many students want to find a community where they feel supported, valued, and engaged.”

Through recruitment events, new student orientation, registered student organization fairs, and community-building activities, chapters have introduced students to opportunities that extend beyond the classroom. The results were evident across campus. Membership increased across every governing council, creating one of the strongest years for fraternity and sorority life in recent memory.

Among those helping lead that growth was Ryan Gillenwater, president of the Kappa Sigma chapter. During his term, the chapter increased membership by 15%, and Gillenwater was recognized as Greek President of the Year for his leadership and commitment to strengthening the chapter experience.

“What makes fraternity and sorority life special is the people,” Gillenwater said. “It’s a chance to meet students from different backgrounds, get involved on campus, and build relationships that can last long after graduation.”

The growth is about more than just the organization. For many students, it’s a desire to be part of campus life and take advantage of opportunities that help them professionally.

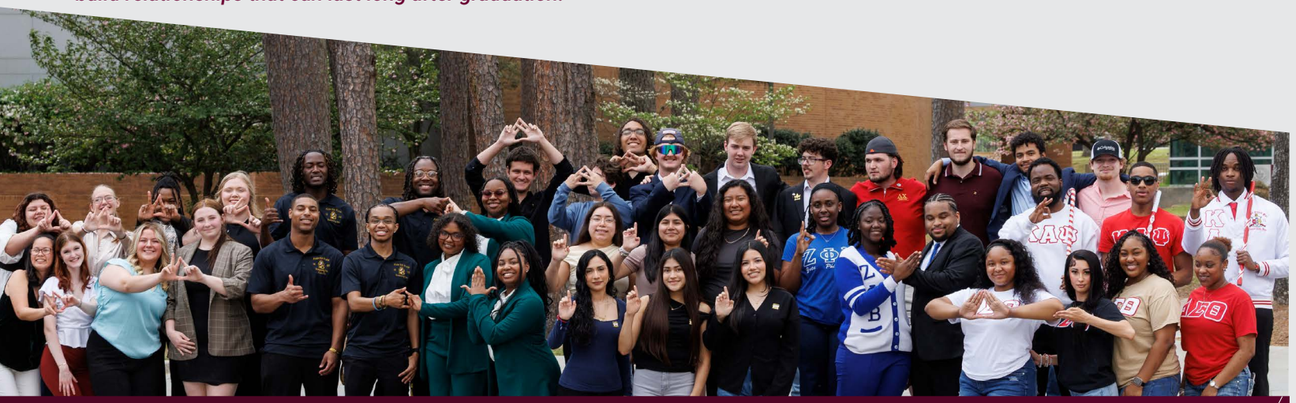
One of the developments Sustaita is most proud of is the increased collaboration among organizations. Throughout the year, chapters worked together on campus events and recruitment efforts, resulting in a more connected fraternity and sorority community.

“Greek life enhances the student experience by creating smaller communities within the larger university environment,” Sustaita said. “These connections and experiences help students feel more connected to the university, increase their sense of belonging, and contribute to their overall success both during and after college.”

The membership growth is significant, but the numbers tell only part of the story. Behind every member is a student who found friendships, support, and opportunities that enriched their college experience.

As fraternity and sorority life continues to grow at UA Little Rock, more students are choosing community and finding a place to belong.

That momentum extends well beyond fraternity and sorority life. Over the past two years, UA Little Rock has more than doubled the number of registered student organizations, growing from 45 to 93. Today, more than 4,800 students are involved in student organizations, creating more opportunities for students to connect, develop leadership skills, and become part of campus life.



93
Registered student organizations

107%
Growth in RSOs in the last two years

4,869
Students involved in campus clubs







Preparing Nurses for a Changing Healthcare Landscape

UA Little Rock expanded its approach to nursing education with the dedication of the Innovation Station, Arkansas’s first virtual reality simulation lab dedicated specifically to training nursing students.

The approximately 1,800-square-foot Innovation Station adds a new dimension to the hands-on learning already taking place in the university’s Center for Simulation Innovation. While the two spaces complement one another, they give students distinctly different experiences. In the Center for Simulation Innovation, students physically practice nursing skills using high-fidelity manikins and hospital equipment. In the Innovation Station, students enter virtual patient-care environments that challenge them to assess patients, recognize changes in their condition, and make clinical decisions.

“Virtual reality gives students an opportunity to practice the critical thinking that happens behind every nursing decision,” said Dr. Judy Staley, Willard and Pat Walker director of the Center for Simulation Innovation. “VR requires them to think and respond in the moment, while also giving us opportunities to pause, reflect, and learn from their decisions. That’s where some of the most meaningful learning happens.”

The Innovation Station also features Resuscitation Quality Improvement technology, allowing students to practice and assess their basic life support skills, like CPR, every three months and receive immediate feedback. The approach helps students continually reinforce lifesaving skills rather than allowing long periods to pass between CPR trainings.

The new space builds on UA Little Rock’s longstanding investment in experiential nursing education. Over the past four years, nursing students have completed more than 114,000 hours of simulation training.

“Simulation gives us the confidence to make decisions under pressure, reflect on our choices, and apply what we learn to real patients.”

—Keya McGee, president of the Student Nurses Association

The lab helps sudents gain practical skills sooner, which helps fill the state’s need for well-trained, confident nurses.

“Simulation gives us the confidence to make decisions under pressure, reflect on our choices, and apply what we learn to real patients,” said Keya McGee, president of the Student Nurses Association.

The Center for Simulation Innovation and the new Innovation Station create a continuum of learning where students can experience clinical situations virtually, discuss their decisions, practice skills hands-on, and continually reinforce critical competencies. These spaces help ensure UA Little Rock graduates nurses fully prepared to serve Arkansans.

EXPERIENCE

Trojan Way Comes to Life at Winter Fest

Thousands of twinkling lights, an outdoor ice rink, and nearly 4,000 visitors transformed the Trojan Way into the heart of the holiday season during UA Little Rock's inaugural Winter Fest.

Hosted on the newly revitalized Trojan Way, Winter Fest allowed visitors to experience the evolving campus firsthand. Live music, ice skating, family activities, and festive displays drew thousands to campus and highlighted the university's newest gathering space.

"Winter Fest reflects exactly what was envisioned for Trojan Way — a beautiful, welcoming space that strengthens connection and brings our campus and community together," said Emily Cox, vice chancellor for university affairs.

The event gave many visitors their first chance to experience the transformed Trojan Way, while offering students another reason to spend time on campus after classes ended.

"Walking down Trojan Way and seeing it lit up with families, students, alumni, and neighbors all enjoying the night was really special," said Ainsley Kendall, president of the Student Government Association. "Events like Winter Fest show students that this is their home and their community."

Winter Fest added a new tradition to campus, creating another way for students and the broader community to connect with UA Little Rock beyond the classroom.

> *"Events like Winter Fest show students that this is their home and their community."*
>
> *— Ainsley Kendall, president of SGA*













From the Lab to the National Stage

For most undergraduate researchers, presenting findings at a conference is a major milestone. But Nistha Neupane and Zane Austin are not most student researchers. They pushed their research beyond the lab, taking it to a national startup competition where they secured five-figure funding for their research.

Donaghey Scholars Neupane and Austin earned national recognition for NanoLit, a nanotechnology-based startup that grew out of years of research in Dr. Noureen Siraj's laboratory. The project aims to make chemotherapy more precise, reducing damage to healthy cells while maintaining its effectiveness against cancer.

"The hair loss, nail bed damage, and loss of immune function that we see in cancer patients are due, at least in part, to the effect of chemotherapy," Austin said. "By formulating a drug that is highly selective toward tumor cells, we can mitigate these dangers without compromising the efficiency of the drug."

For Neupane, recipient of the Edward L. Whitbeck Memorial Award – the highest honor presented to a graduating senior – the project is deeply personal. After undergoing tumor surgery as a child, she became determined to pursue a career in oncology.

"I went through my own tumor operation, and that experience put many things into perspective for me," she said.

The team's research attracted national attention through America's Startup, a highly competitive pitch competition as part of the America 250 celebrations. The startup selected 30 semifinalist teams from colleges and universities across the country. Austin and Neupane advanced to the finals, competing alongside students from institutions such as Stanford, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Their work was evaluated by a panel that included Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, former U.S. Treasurer Rosie Rios, and other prominent entrepreneurs and business leaders. The team was named one of the 10 winners and secured $25,000 in funding to continue developing NanoLit.

"Being able to put UA Little Rock on the map and have students from universities like Johns Hopkins and Stanford be so impressed by our work puts into perspective how well we have done on our journey so far," Neupane said.

The recognition validated years of work in Dr. Siraj's laboratory and provided new momentum for the team's efforts to advance NanoLit.

Along the way, they showed that groundbreaking research – and the students behind it – can come from anywhere, including a laboratory at UA Little Rock.

> *"Being able to put UA Little Rock on the map and have students from universities like Johns Hopkins and Stanford be so impressed by our work puts into perspective how well we have done on our journey so far."*
>
> *—Nistha Neupane, Donaghey Scholar*

Read more about their research and the competition.







Research with Real-World Impact

Two University of Arkansas at Little Rock researchers are joining a statewide network that connects leading researchers with industry partners to advance discoveries that can strengthen Arkansas's economy.

Dr. Anindya Ghosh and Dr. Philip Huff are among the newest members of the Arkansas Research Alliance Academy, a distinction that includes $75,000 in funding to support each researcher's work while creating new opportunities for collaboration with researchers and industry leaders across the state.

Dr. Ghosh, professor of chemistry and associate dean of the Donaghey College of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, is developing new chemical processes and materials designed to reduce environmental impact. His research explores ways to make chemical production cleaner and more efficient, with potential applications in energy, manufacturing, and environmental protection.

"I'm honored by this recognition and the opportunity to continue advancing research that can make a meaningful difference," Ghosh said.

> *"I'm honored by this recognition and the opportunity to continue advancing research that can make a meaningful difference."*
>
> *— Dr. Anindya Ghosh*

> *"This recognition strengthens our ability to collaborate with partners across Arkansas and expand research opportunities for students."*
>
> *— Dr. Philip Huff*

Dr. Huff, associate professor of computer science and director of the Cyberspace Operations Research and Education (CORE) Center, leads research in cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. His work focuses on identifying vulnerabilities and developing stronger protections for the critical systems and infrastructure that businesses, communities, and industries depend on.

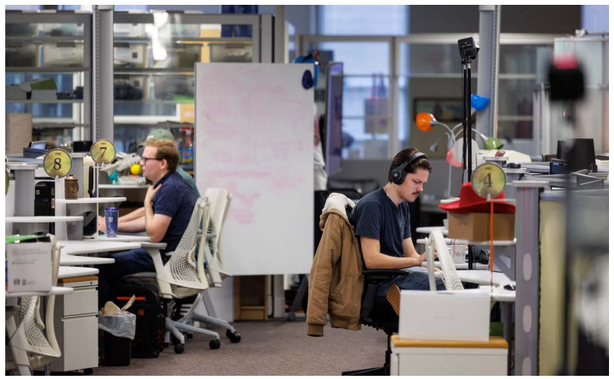
"This recognition strengthens our ability to collaborate with partners across Arkansas and expand research opportunities for students," Huff said.

The Arkansas Research Alliance Academy brings together researchers and industry leaders to strengthen collaboration and advance research with the potential to contribute to Arkansas's economic growth.

Their selection strengthens connections between UA Little Rock researchers and industry leaders across Arkansas, creating opportunities to align research with real-world needs and support the state's economic growth.









Securing Critical Infrastructure

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock expanded its research capabilities in one of the nation's most critical fields by launching the Cyberspace Operations Research and Education (CORE) Center.

Supported by funding from the Office of Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin, the center combines cybersecurity research with hands-on learning opportunities that address real-world challenges facing organizations across Arkansas.

Led by Dr. Philip Huff, the center serves as a hub for cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and critical infrastructure research.

"Cybersecurity is no longer just an IT issue – it's a national security, economic development, and workforce issue," Huff said. "The CORE Center creates opportunities for students to gain real-world experience while helping organizations address increasingly complex cyber threats."

One of the center's key components is the cyber clinic, where students provide cybersecurity assessments and support for public schools, small businesses, healthcare providers, and community organizations that may not have the resources to hire professional cybersecurity services. Working alongside faculty and industry mentors, students help identify vulnerabilities and recommend practical steps organizations can take to strengthen their defenses.

Around 30 students can participate in the clinic through paid positions, gaining practical experience while serving organizations throughout Arkansas. Over the next five years, as many as 100 students may participate in the clinic.

"Working in the Cyber Clinic has allowed me to apply what I've learned in the classroom to real-world cybersecurity challenges," said senior Monica Procknaw. "The experience has strengthened my technical skills and given me a better understanding of how cybersecurity professionals protect critical systems and organizations."

> *"Cybersecurity is no longer just an IT issue – it's a national security, economic development, and workforce issue. The CORE Center creates opportunities for students to gain real-world experience while helping organizations address increasingly complex cyber threats."*
>
> *—Dr. Philip Huff*

The Cyber Clinic is one part of the CORE Center's growing research enterprise. Faculty and students are developing new approaches to protect critical infrastructure, including power and water systems, while exploring how artificial intelligence can strengthen cyber defenses. They also conduct digital forensics research in collaboration with partners such as the FBI, Arkansas State Police, and the Pulaski County Prosecutor's Office.

As the center continues to grow, it is preparing the next generation of cybersecurity professionals while advancing research that helps organizations respond to evolving cyber threats.

Scan the QR code for KATV's Coverage on UA Little Rock opening the new CORE center.

Research That Reached the World



When Dr. Raffaela Lesch, assistant professor of biology, and her students set out to study urban raccoons, they did not expect their work to capture international attention. Yet a classroom research project at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock ultimately reached audiences around the world, generating coverage from NPR, BBC, CNN, and the Smithsonian and sparking widespread public interest in scientific research.

The study, co-authored by Lesch and 16 students, examined whether urban environments influence physical traits associated with the early stages of domestication. Using more than 20,000 images submitted through the citizen science platform iNaturalist, the research found that urban raccoons exhibited shorter snouts than their rural counterparts–a characteristic commonly associated with domesticated animals.

"Urban environments can mimic the conditions early domesticated animals experienced, like when dogs and cats were beginning that process," Lesch said. "These environments force animals to coexist closely with humans, which, while risky, also comes with benefits like fewer predators and easy access to food. We wanted to see whether cities could provide a setting to study early-stage domestication processes in wild populations."

The research began in a biology class as a course-based research experience, allowing students to contribute to publishable research as part of their coursework. For many of the students, the raccoon study became their first published research.

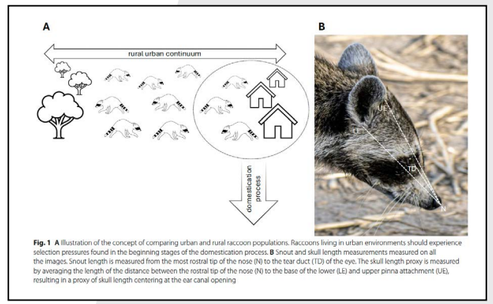


Fig. 1 **A** Illustration of the concept of comparing urban and rural raccoon populations. Raccoons living in urban environments should experience selection pressures found in the beginning stages of the domestication process. **B** Snout and skull length measurements measured on all the images. Snout length is measured from the most rostral tip of the nose (N) to the tear duct (TD) of the eye. The skull length proxy is measured by averaging the length of the distance between the rostral tip of the nose (N) to the base of the lower (LE) and upper pinna attachment (UE), resulting in a proxy of skull length centering at the ear canal opening

> *"Having the opportunity to see how the process of working with data and reaching the endpoint of publication was a great way to prepare for my own future as I move to complete my degree."*
>
> — *AJ Bradley, graduate student*

"I came into the class never having touched the programs we were using, and I surely had never had a hand in creating something like this. To have the chance to work through every step was amazing. From generating our hypothesis to actually running the models for the data, all of us in the class were able to work together to generate something we could be proud of," said graduate student AJ Bradley. "Having the opportunity to see how the process of working with data and reaching the endpoint of publication was a great way to prepare for my own future as I move to complete my degree."

The study's success also led to new collaborations, speaking invitations, and additional research opportunities for Lesch and her students. It also showcased the impact of citizen science, with everyday observations contributing to research that advanced scientific understanding while engaging the public.

"There is incredible research coming out of Arkansas," Lesch said. "You don't need massive budgets to do meaningful, competitive science. Building community, involving students, and inviting the public into the process is where a lot of that impact comes from."

From a classroom at UA Little Rock to audiences around the world, the project allowed students to make meaningful contributions to research with an international audience.

Scan to read the BBC article "Cuter and closer: Raccoons may be on their way to becoming America's next pet."



> *"These environments force animals to coexist closely with humans, which, while risky, also comes with benefits like fewer predators and easy access to food."*
>
> — *Dr. Raffaela Lesch, assistant professor of biology*

Investing in Research with Real-World Impact

UA Little Rock's research enterprise reached another milestone this year with $12 million in federal investments supporting work in nanotechnology, cybersecurity, and online behavior.

Supported by U.S. Sen. John Boozman and the Arkansas congressional delegation, the investments are strengthening research infrastructure, expanding partnerships, and creating new opportunities for students and faculty across multiple disciplines.

The largest investment, $6 million, will support research at the Center for Integrative Nanotechnology Sciences, including advanced equipment and ongoing work exploring nanomaterials for bone and tissue regeneration. The funding will expand the university's ability to conduct sophisticated materials research while supporting collaborations with industry and research partners.

"These investments strengthen the university's ability to conduct advanced characterization and research at a higher level both academically and industrially," said Dr. Alex Biris, chief scientist of the Center for Integrative Nanotechnology Sciences. "The funding expands our research capacity and allows us to pursue innovative solutions with significant implications for both national defense and medical advancement."

A $5 million award will support the development of a cyber-resilient computing platform through a partnership with Montana State University. The project focuses on protecting satellite systems and other mission-critical technologies from emerging cyber threats.

"This project advances our ability to build AI models that protect mission-critical systems operating in increasingly complex and contested cyber environments in space," said Dr. Philip Huff, director of the CORE Center. "It reflects UA Little Rock's growing leadership in applied cybersecurity research."

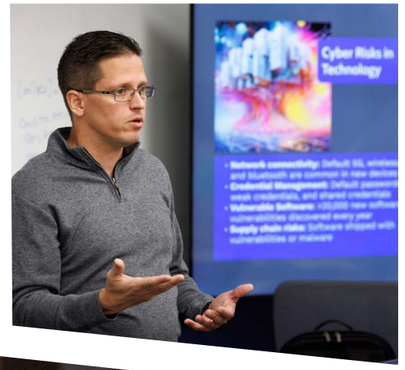
An additional $1 million investment will expand the work of the Collaboration for Social Media and Online Behavioral Studies (COSMOS) Research Center, which studies social networks, online behavior, and data analytics to better understand complex digital ecosystems and national security challenges.

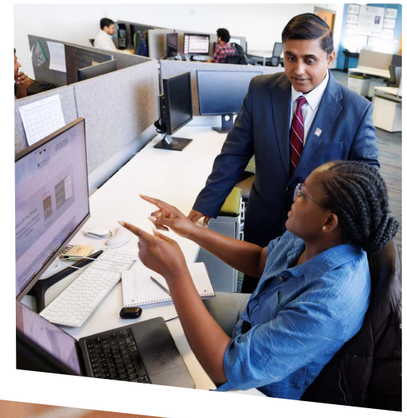
"Social network analysis plays a critical role in understanding complex digital ecosystems and cognitive security challenges," said Dr. Nitin Agarwal, director of the COSMOS Research Center. "This funding allows us to deepen our research impact while preparing students to lead in high-demand intelligence and analytics fields."

These investments help strengthen UA Little Rock's capacity to address complex challenges through research while creating new opportunities for students to contribute to discoveries with local, national, and global impact.











Scan the QR code to read more about the KTHV Coverage.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Serving Those Who Served

Every veteran deserves access to the benefits and services they earned through their military service, regardless of where they live.

With the help of a $750,000 federal appropriation secured by U.S. Sen. John Boozman, UA Little Rock is expanding efforts to provide free legal assistance to veterans across Arkansas through the Veterans Legal Services Clinic at the William H. Bowen School of Law.

The clinic creates impact in two ways. Arkansas veterans receive help navigating complex legal and benefits systems, while Bowen students gain hands-on experience representing clients and advocating for those who have served their country.

"This funding strengthens our ability to stand alongside Arkansas veterans and ensure they have access to the legal services they deserve," said Dean Colin Crawford. "It also gives our students meaningful, real-world experience advocating for veterans and their families."

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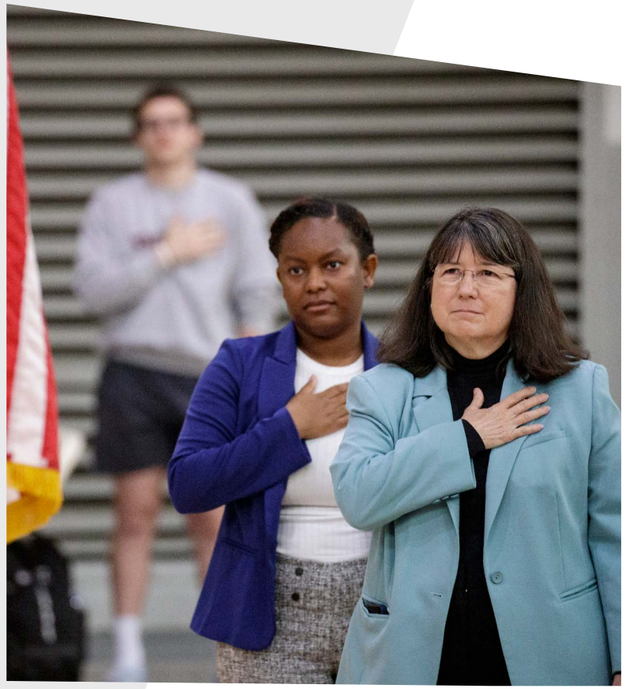
— Dean Colin Crawford, William H. Bowen School of Law

Since its creation, the clinic has served veterans in nearly two-thirds of Arkansas counties and helped secure more than $500,000 in benefits. The new funding will help expand those services and move the clinic closer to its goal of serving veterans in every county in Arkansas.

By connecting legal education with public service, the Veterans Legal Services Clinic is helping improve the lives of veterans while preparing the next generation of attorneys to serve communities across Arkansas.









Trojan Athletics is community engagement at its core.

— Frank Cuervo, director of athletics



A New Conference, New Rivalries

UA Little Rock Athletics entered a new era in 2026 with its move to the United Athletic Conference (UAC).

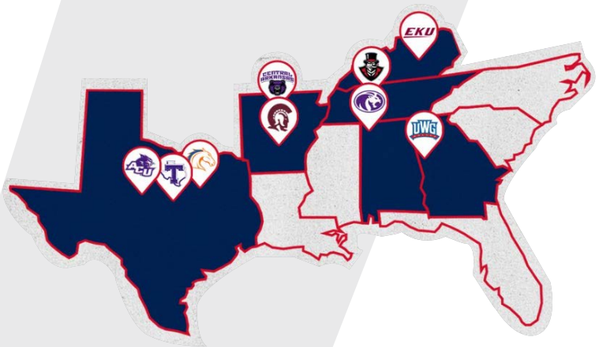
The transition places the Trojans alongside regional institutions including Abilene Christian, Tarleton State, UT Arlington, and Central Arkansas, creating new rivalries and more opportunities for student-athletes to compete closer to home. The conference's footprint throughout Arkansas, Texas, and the surrounding region strengthens regional competition while expanding the visibility of Trojan Athletics.

"Regional competition helps teams by reducing travel time, minimizing time out of class, creating more opportunities for fans to travel, and building rivalries," said Director of Athletics Frank Cuervo.

The move comes at a time of tremendous momentum for the department. Since joining the Ohio Valley Conference in 2022, Little Rock has captured a Commissioner's Cup, won multiple conference championships, and established itself as one of the league's most successful athletics programs.

As members of the UAC, the Trojans are building on that success while competing against a strong group of peer institutions across the region.

UNITED
ATHLETIC CONFERENCE









The Greatest Season in Program History

A year after rewriting the record book, Little Rock Baseball proved its success was no fluke. The Trojans followed their historic 2025 season with an even more remarkable 2026 campaign, capturing a second consecutive Ohio Valley Conference Tournament championship, earning another NCAA Tournament appearance, and achieving the program's first national ranking.

Then they made history.

After winning six of seven games to claim the OVC Tournament title, Little Rock advanced through the NCAA Hattiesburg Regional, defeating nationally ranked Southern Miss and capturing the program's first regional championship. The victory sent the Trojans to their first NCAA Super Regional and placed them among the final 16 teams remaining in the nation.



The historic run energized Trojans across the state, with hundreds of fans gathering in Little Rock for a Super Regional watch party.

"I did not want people to kind of pat us on the head after last year and go, 'Well, that was nice. So happy for you guys to have a year like that,'" said Head Coach Chris Curry. "I wanted to fight with every fiber of my being not to let that happen."

Instead, the Trojans raised the bar even higher.

Little Rock finished the season with a program-record 39 victories, defeated nationally ranked opponents, and continued establishing itself as one of college baseball's emerging programs.

"There comes a time in every program where they have a year and then they have another year that changes the program forever," Curry said. "That's what I had hoped—that we had started that trigger year and then the backup year. Now you're off and running where it's expected that Little Rock is going to compete for championships, be in the postseason, and be in a regional."

By season's end, the Trojans had not only delivered the greatest season in program history, they had transformed expectations for what Little Rock Baseball can achieve.



A Championship Standard

Women's Golf continued its impressive run of success in 2025-26, capturing its second Ohio Valley Conference championship in three years and earning a return trip to NCAA Regional competition.

The Trojans dominated the OVC Championship, winning the team title by 19 strokes and securing a berth in the NCAA Tallahassee Regional. The appearance marked further established Little Rock as one of the conference's premier programs.

"This group has meant so much to our program," Head Coach Jenna Birch said. "They won a championship, handled pressure all spring, and earned the opportunity to compete on this stage."

From a conference championship to another appearance on the national stage, the Trojans continued building a tradition of excellence that has become a hallmark of the program.



> *"This group has meant so much to our program."*
>
> *— Jenna Birch, women's golf coach*





















Preparing Arkansas's Workforce for What's Next



As industries evolve and workforce needs change, UA Little Rock is helping Arkansans gain the skills needed to succeed in today's economy.

Through its Workforce Development Center and Corporate and Community Education programs, the university is creating training opportunities that respond directly to employer and community needs.

"We work closely with industry leaders to identify real workforce gaps and respond with relevant, high-impact training," said Nick Stevens, director of Corporate and Community Education.

One example is a new series of artificial intelligence courses designed to help professionals understand and apply emerging technologies in the workplace.

"These courses are about more than learning technology," said entrepreneur-in-residence Marla Johnson. "They're about giving professionals the ability to apply AI to real business challenges, solve problems creatively, and gain a competitive edge."

UA Little Rock also launched its medical Spanish program for healthcare professionals, helping participants improve communication with Spanish-speaking patients and better serve Arkansas's communities.

"From physicians to front desk personnel, bilingual professionals can make a significant impact on patient outcomes and may even earn up to 20% more in salary than their monolingual peers," said Rex Wilkins, assistant professor of Spanish.

The university also partnered with Gina Smith, CEO of Rock Region Consulting, to launch a new human resources training program designed to prepare professionals for careers in one of the state's growing workforce sectors.

"Organizations need HR professionals who are prepared before they're faced with high-stakes decisions," Smith said. "This program blends core knowledge with applied learning so participants leave with practical skills they can immediately use."

Demand for the programs has been strong. During the year, more than 1,027 professionals participated in workforce training programs through UA Little Rock, gaining skills in areas ranging from artificial intelligence and healthcare communication to human resources and leadership development.

Through partnerships with employers and community organizations, UA Little Rock continues to connect education with opportunity while helping meet workforce needs across Arkansas.

> *"These courses are about more than learning technology. They're about giving professionals the ability to apply AI to real business challenges, solve problems creatively, and gain a competitive edge."*
>
> *— Marla Johnson, entrepreneur-in-residence*

30
Medical Spanish Registrations

5
HR Essential Registrations

320
Registrations for AI courses

Degrees That Strengthen Arkansas's Workforce

For many working professionals, earning a college degree can be difficult while balancing the demands of work and family. Through partnerships between UA Little Rock and employers across Arkansas, more employees are finding a path to complete their education while advancing their careers.

Today, 150 employers partner with UA Little Rock to invest in their employees' education through the corporate partnership program. Since the program began, 1,033 students have participated, with 321 earning their degrees. This fall, 603 students are participating in the program, demonstrating continued demand for opportunities that allow working professionals to advance their education while building their careers.

"One of the greatest measures of success is seeing employees cross the graduation stage," said Matthew Bellew, coordinator of corporate partnerships. "When employers invest in education, they aren't just supporting individual employees, they're strengthening their organizations and helping build the skilled workforce Arkansas needs."

Clark Contractors has seen that impact firsthand. The commercial general contractor joined the Corporate Partnership Program in 2024, building on a long history of hiring graduates from UA Little Rock's Construction Management and Civil and Construction Engineering programs.

"The scholarships are grease on the tracks to get our workforce on the right path and be able to complete something tangible they can hold on to," said Jacob Earls, senior project manager at Clark Contractors. "I really do believe it is something that makes a difference for our team members."

For project administrator Grant Thomas, the partnership provided the opportunity to continue his education while beginning his career.

"I always planned to continue my education, but I was unsure what that path would look like until I began exploring companies that actively invest in their employees," Thomas said. "Seeing the level of trust and confidence Clark places in young professionals gave me the assurance to take that next step."

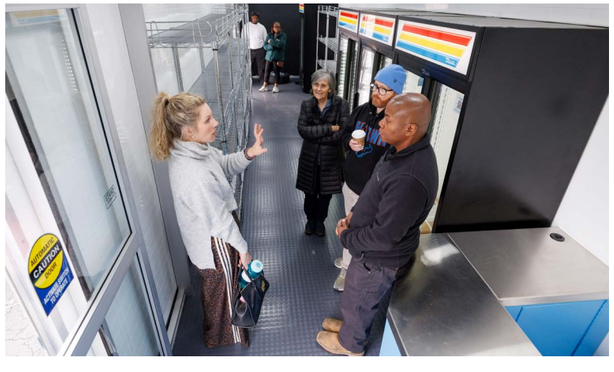
Thomas is one of several Clark employees currently pursuing a construction management degree while working full time.

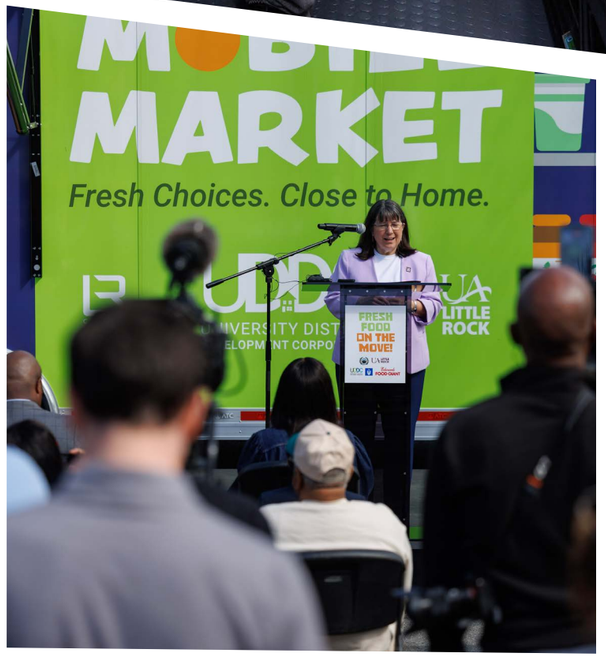
Stories like Thomas's are being repeated across Arkansas. As more working professionals earn degrees without putting their careers on hold, employers gain skilled leaders, individuals expand their opportunities, and communities benefit from a stronger workforce.











Building Healthier Neighborhoods

When the mobile market rolls into a neighborhood, fresh produce, dairy products, meats, and other grocery staples are suddenly just a short walk away.

Launched through a partnership among the city of Little Rock, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and the University District Development Corporation, the mobile market is bringing fresh, affordable food directly to neighborhoods where access has long been limited.

The initiative is part of a broader effort to address food insecurity in central Little Rock and ensure residents have greater access to healthy food closer to home. The city of Little Rock committed **$850,000** in American Rescue Plan Act funding to support the project, helping bring the market from concept to reality.

"UA Little Rock continues to step up for the neighborhoods," said Little Rock Mayor Frank Scott Jr. "This is just a step in the transformation. We have a journey, but you have to start before you get there."

The University District Development Corporation operates the mobile market and coordinates outreach throughout the neighborhoods it serves. For Barrett Allen, director of the University District Partnership, the launch is the result of relationships developed across the district over time.

"This initiative reflects years of relationship-building and shared commitment," Allen said. "By working together, we can bring resources directly to neighborhoods in ways that are practical and sustainable."

The project also highlights UA Little Rock's role as an anchor institution in the University District, working alongside community organizations and city leaders to address challenges identified by residents.

> *"This is what strong partnerships look like. When we align our efforts with the city and community organizations, we can create solutions that directly improve quality of life for our neighbors."*
>
> *— Chancellor Christina S. Drale*

Additional support from Edwards Food Giant, the Little Rock School District, Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church, the Arkansas Community Foundation, and the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance helped expand the initiative's reach and strengthen its long-term sustainability.

Each stop the market makes creates another opportunity for residents to access fresh, affordable groceries in their own neighborhood.

"This is what strong partnerships look like," Chancellor Christina S. Drale said. "When we align our efforts with the city and community organizations, we can create solutions that directly improve quality of life for our neighbors."









From Hackathon to Reality

A year ago, students gathered at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock to develop artificial intelligence solutions for healthcare challenges facing Arkansas. One year later, one of those ideas is moving into development, demonstrating that innovation doesn't always end when the competition does.

That momentum helped fuel the second annual AI Hackathon and HealthTech Startup Week, which brought together 54 of Arkansas's highest-performing high school and college students to tackle real healthcare challenges alongside mentors, healthcare professionals, entrepreneurs, and technology leaders.

Rather than participating in a traditional coding competition, students spent the week working in teams structured like startup companies. They identified customer needs, collaborated with healthcare professionals, developed business strategies, and built AI-powered solutions designed to improve lives.

"This is much more than a coding competition," said Marla Johnson, technology entrepreneur-in-residence at UA Little Rock. "Students are working like startup founders. They're identifying customer needs, collaborating with healthcare professionals, building solutions with AI, and learning how to transform ideas into products that can improve lives."

Student teams explored challenges ranging from maternal and infant health in rural Arkansas to mental health intervention, cancer survivorship, healthcare access, and healthy aging. Along the way, they gained experience in entrepreneurship, product development, customer discovery, and public speaking.

The competition's $10,000 grand prize went to Resonate, a music therapy platform designed to improve access to care for people living with Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Inspired by the story of a patient who began humming along to a familiar song after years without speaking, the team developed a platform that creates personalized playlists and uses AI-powered voice analysis to help caregivers better understand patients' emotional needs.

Second-place honors went to InsuraMatch, a platform designed to help consumers better understand and navigate health insurance options, while Materna earned third place for its wearable health monitoring platform aimed at improving prenatal care.

"We hope students leave with new skills, new relationships, and perhaps even the foundation for future startups," Johnson said. "We want students to see how technology, entrepreneurship, and collaboration can create meaningful change."



Inspiring Arkansas's Brightest Minds for 25 Years

For 25 years, the Jodie Mahony Center for Gifted Education at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock has helped shape the future of Arkansas classrooms by supporting educators, expanding opportunities for talented students, and advancing approaches to gifted education that are gaining national attention.

That leadership was recognized this year when UA Little Rock faculty were invited to Washington, D.C., to share the university's approach at a national colloquium focused on preparing teachers to support advanced learners. UA Little Rock is one of only two undergraduate teacher preparation programs in the nation that requires gifted education coursework as part of its middle childhood education curriculum.

"For 25 years, the Mahony Center has helped position UA Little Rock as a leader in gifted education," said Dr. Ann Robinson, the center's founding director. "Our goal has always been to cultivate talent at every level. From young students discovering their passions to educators strengthening their practice, we want to encourage learners to explore their talents and reach their potential."

Over the years, that work has reached thousands of students and educators across Arkansas. The center's Summer Laureate University for Youth program has served more than 14,000 students. Additionally, through its STEM Starters initiative, the center has spent 15 years researching ways to introduce engineering and computer





science learning in elementary classrooms. The work is supported by more than $6.6 million in federal funding and was recently featured in Gifted Child Today, a national publication focused on gifted education.

As one of only about 20 university-based gifted education centers in the country, the Mahony Center enters its next 25 years with a growing national profile and an ongoing commitment to strengthening gifted education in Arkansas and beyond.

NEW FACES

New Leadership Appointments at UA Little Rock

UA Little Rock welcomed several accomplished leaders to key academic and administrative roles during the year. Bringing expertise in higher education leadership, technology, economic development, athletics, and human resources, these leaders will help advance the university's mission.



Mark Baillie, Ph.D.
Provost Fellow
Dr. Mark Baillie, associate professor of chemistry, was named Provost Fellow for the 2026-2027 academic year. In this role, Baillie will gain university-level leadership experience while supporting key Academic Affairs initiatives. His work will include facilitating academic student complaint and grade appeal processes, assisting with teaching workload policy revisions, and supporting new faculty orientation and mentoring programs. Through the fellowship, Baillie will contribute to efforts that strengthen academic operations and support faculty and student success across UA Little Rock.



Aubrey Becker
Head Volleyball Coach
Aubrey Becker was named head volleyball coach at UA Little Rock in January 2026. Becker brings more than a decade of collegiate coaching experience, including positions at West Virginia, Iowa, Oral Roberts, Davidson, Brown, and Florida State. At West Virginia, she helped the Mountaineers achieve the best start in program history and recruit a nationally ranked signing class. She also contributed to two NCAA Tournament appearances at Florida State, including a Sweet Sixteen run in 2016. A former collegiate standout at Austin Peay State University, Becker earned a bachelor's degree in communications and public relations and a master's degree in coaching and athletic administration.



Jim Carter
Associate Vice Chancellor and Chief Information Officer
Jim Carter joined UA Little Rock as associate vice chancellor and chief information officer, bringing a collaborative leadership style and a commitment to using technology to advance the university's mission. A UA Little Rock alumnus, Carter is focused on strengthening technology infrastructure, enhancing cybersecurity, and supporting innovation across campus. His leadership will help ensure that students, faculty, and staff have access to reliable, secure, and forward-thinking technology solutions that support teaching, learning, research, and university operations.



Amy Davis, Ph.D.
Associate Vice Chancellor of Human Resources
Dr. Amy Davis joined UA Little Rock as associate vice chancellor of human resources, bringing extensive experience in organizational leadership, employee engagement, and workplace culture. Before joining the university, she served as a vice president at LeMoyne-Owen College. At UA Little Rock, Davis is leading efforts to strengthen talent development, employee well-being, and organizational effectiveness while fostering a workplace culture that supports the university's mission and strategic priorities.



Jeremy Ecke, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, and Education
Dr. Jeremy Ecke was named dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, Social Sciences, and Education, bringing more than two decades of experience in higher education leadership, teaching, and student success initiatives. Throughout his career, he has championed innovative academic programs, faculty development, and community partnerships that enhance student learning and engagement. As dean, Ecke will lead the college's efforts to expand academic opportunities, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and prepare students to make meaningful contributions in their professions and communities.



Travis Ford
Head Men's Basketball Coach
Travis Ford was named head men's basketball coach at UA Little Rock in March 2026, bringing nearly three decades of head coaching experience and a record of success at the Division I level. With nearly 500 career victories and seven NCAA Tournament appearances, Ford has led programs at Saint Louis, Oklahoma State, Massachusetts, and Eastern Kentucky. His accomplishments include the 2019 Atlantic 10 Championship at Saint Louis, five NCAA Tournament appearances at Oklahoma State, and the 2005 Ohio Valley Conference Championship at Eastern Kentucky. A former standout player at Kentucky, Ford helped lead the Wildcats to the 1993 Final Four and earned two All-SEC selections.



Aaron Huntley
Executive Director of the Arkansas Economic Development Institute
Aaron Huntley was named executive director of the Arkansas Economic Development Institute, bringing extensive experience in economic development, workforce strategy, and public-private collaboration. Throughout his career, he has worked with business, government, and community leaders to advance initiatives that support economic growth and strengthen regional competitiveness. At UA Little Rock, Huntley will lead the institute's efforts to provide research, data, and strategic insights that help communities, industries, and policymakers make informed decisions and drive economic opportunity across Arkansas.

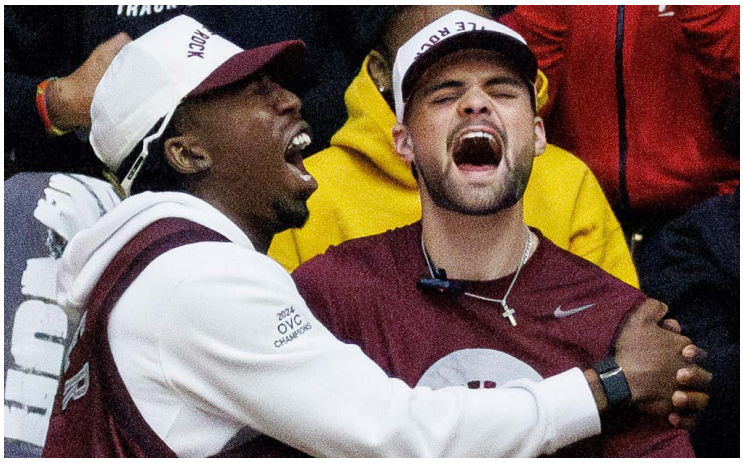


Judy Staley, D.N.P.
Willard and Pat Walker Director of the Center for Simulation Innovation
Dr. Judy Staley, assistant professor of nursing, was named Willard and Pat Walker director of the Center for Simulation Innovation, bringing experience in nursing education and simulation-based learning to the role. As director, Staley is leading efforts to expand immersive learning opportunities, integrate simulation throughout the nursing curriculum, and ensure experiences align with student learning outcomes. Her leadership will help prepare nursing students with the confidence, clinical skills, and hands-on experience needed to deliver high-quality care and meet the healthcare needs of communities across Arkansas.

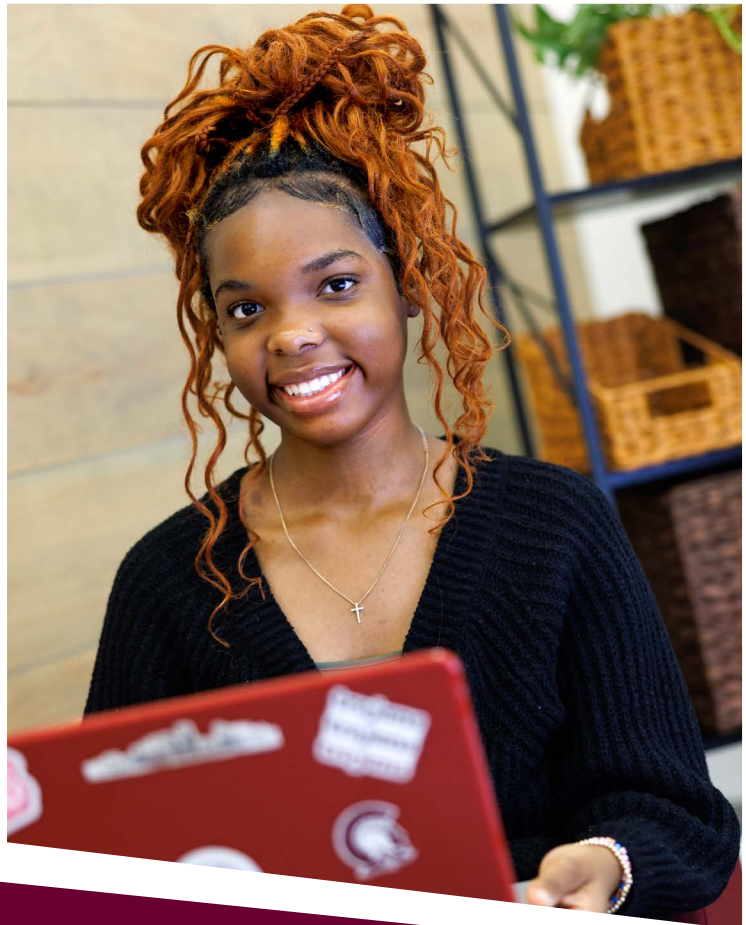
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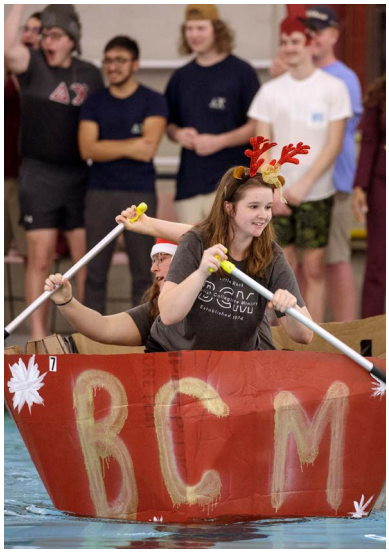
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